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College students' experiences of sexual violence at Western Washington University

Zoë Evans-Agnew
Western Washington University

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Zoë J. Evans-Agnew

Advised by Mary Hunt

Senior Honors Capstone Project, Western Washington University

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Abstract

Introduction: Individual and structural factors like student demographic characteristics, a Greek system, Division I athletics, substance use, and university size, facilitate sexual violence (SV) on college campuses. This study examined SV experiences of students at Western Washington University, a large, residential, public school without a Greek system or major athletic presence.

Method: Data were collected from October 2020 to January 2021 during the COVID-19 pandemic. A large convenience sample ($N = 924$) of college students participated in an online survey. Participants were majority women (68%), white (77%), and identified as a variety of sexual orientations: heterosexual (52%), bisexual (24%), LGQ+ (24%). Participants responded to questions about unwanted sexual experiences by behavior and incidence of SA under five circumstances (e.g., force, coercion, ignoring refusals). They also described factors (e.g., location, substance use) of their most recent incident of SV during college.

Results: One in five WWU students reported experiencing SV during college and 35.2% of WWU students reported experiencing SV before college. Gender expansive students, bisexual students, and women reported higher rates of SV than men and heterosexual students. SV often occurred in conjunction with alcohol (22.2%) at an off-campus apartment/house (34.5%) where the perpetrator was a casual acquaintance or hookup (32.8%).

Discussion: SV occurs on college campuses regardless of certain significant structural factors. Gender and sexual orientation are salient factors, with bisexual women experiencing the highest rates of SA. These data were used by the university prevention and wellness services to inform educational programming and counseling efforts.

Keywords: sexual violence, sexual assault, campus sexual assault, college sexual assault, university sexual assault, rape

Introduction

Sexuality shapes culture and identity, especially in young adulthood when people are still developing their sense of self. Positive sexual experiences in young adulthood can lead to healthier future relationships, better self-esteem, and self-worth, whereas negative sexual experiences, like sexual assault and violence, can lead to mental and physical health challenges and future unhealthy relationships (Black et al., 2010; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006; Thurston et al., 2019). As a public health issue, sexual violence affects all members of society and their perceptions and views surrounding sexuality. This literature review will include research on college student sexual behaviors including sexual violence, factors that influence sexual violence, and ways to prevent sexual violence. The information in this literature review will provide context for the current study on college student sexual violence at Western Washington University.

Sexual Violence

Violence in any form, particularly sexual violence, harms a person's sense of self and creates personal and collective trauma, directly threatening one's sexual citizenship, or the recognition that one has the right to say no or yes to different sexual experiences and move as a free agent within the sexual geography of the world (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Sexual violence encompasses many terms used by researchers such as nonconsensual sex, sexual victimization, rape, sexual battery, and unwanted sexual contact (Fedina et al., 2018; Muehlenhard et al., 2017; Stoner & Cramer, 2019). Sexual assault is well-studied, but there is not a unified definition of this term in the literature. These various terms, with many nuanced definitions, can cause research inconsistencies, leading to struggles in replicating findings (Krause et al., 2019; Muehlenhard et al, 2017). In their sexual assault literature meta-analysis, Muehlenhard and

colleagues (2017), define sexual assault as "sexual penetration and sexual touching obtained by force or incapacitation" (p. 551). In this review, we will refer to acts of sexual assault, sexual penetration, sexual touching, rape, etc., as sexual violence. This umbrella term encompasses all acts of sexual aggression that we will discuss in the literature review. This review will also use the terms victim and perpetrator to describe the people involved in sexual violence. There are many terms used to describe individuals who have experienced sexual violence such as survivor, which is often used in advocacy circles, however for the sake of unification with previous literature we will use the term victim to describe the person who was assaulted.

Throughout their lifetime, many people will experience sexual violence (Breiding, 2015). Numerous factors put young people in particular at heightened risk of sexual violence, including their increased rates of substance use, limited knowledge about sex, gendered sexual expectations, and party culture during this stage of life (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Much of the current literature surrounding sexual violence and young people revolves around campus sexual assault. Excluding contextual environment, young people in college are not necessarily at higher risk for sexual violence than young people not in college, but research focuses on sexual assault in this environment because college campuses are convenient places to conduct studies, universities will generally fund research projects, and college students tend to be whiter and richer than nonstudents, which increases the overall sympathy toward this population (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). In terms of the prevalence of sexual violence on college campuses, the literature is conclusive that 1 in 5 or even 1 in 4 women will experience sexual assault during college (Halstead et al., 2017; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019; Millins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2017). It is also important to note there is wide variability of prevalence across campuses due to different research designs and methodologies (Fedina et al., 2016, 2018).

Researchers typically study sexual violence in two ways: qualitative data gathered through ethnographic interviews and quantitative data gathered through campus-wide surveys (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Most of the current literature conducts research using survey data (Krause et al., 2019). Surveys have been criticized in the past for a lack of standardized definitions, measures, and reporting. Additionally, there is evidence of widespread missing data from surveys of sexual violence on college campuses, with some research finding that the actual prevalence of sexual assault could vary from 4.0% to 80.4% due to nonresponders, or people who do not respond to surveys (Rosenberg et al., 2019). Due to this variability, many research teams recommend that individual schools conduct climate surveys to assess the rate of sexual violence on their specific campus.

Campus climate surveys and qualitative data have revealed both individual and structural factors that facilitate sexual assault on college campuses. Common individual factors that affect sexual contexts include demographic characteristics, like gender and sexual orientation, and characteristics of perpetrators of sexual violence. Common structural factors include a school's party and Greek culture, athletics, substance use, the size and affluence of the school, and temporal risks.

Individual Factors that Contribute to Sexual Violence on College Campuses

Demographic Characteristics

Certain demographic characteristics are associated with perpetration and victimization of sexual violence. One of the clearest demographic patterns is gender, with young women experiencing much higher rates of sexual violence than men (Fedina et al., 2017; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019). This does not negate the experiences of men who have been victim to sexual violence; men are less likely to be believed, and they are less likely to be connected with support

resources after experiencing assault, however, their experiences are less emphasized in the literature because significantly higher proportions of women experience sexual violence (Stemple & Meyer, 2014). Additionally, men comprise the majority of perpetrators of sexual assault (Black et al., 2010; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006).

Gender roles and sexual norms are ingrained in the fabric of society, which facilitates these gender patterns of violence. Society teaches women to be polite, nice, passive, and to defer to men in sexual situations (Armstrong et al., 2006). Men are taught to be sexually aggressive and pursue sexual conquests (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Sexual scripts are gendered ways people interact in relationships and tell men and women how to behave in sexual encounters (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). In these sexual scripts, women act as the gatekeepers of sex, which places greater responsibility and blame on them for sexual management (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Society tends to tell men that their job in sexual situations is to "move the ball down the field" while women play defense — this type of metaphor frames sex as a game with winners and losers and contributes to the prevalence of sexual violence (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Often, these sexual scripts also negate men's nonconsensual interactions and contribute to the gendered practice of sex (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). When discussing gender identity, it is important to note that there is a lack of research defining sexual scripts and patterns for non-binary and gender-expansive young adults. Most research up to this point has examined gender dynamics with a binary view (e.g., women and men), which excludes people of other gender identities, who typically have higher rates of sexual assault (Hirsch & Mellins, 2019).

Other relevant demographics include sexual orientation, age, race, socioeconomic status, and relationship status. Gay and bisexual men report sexual assault experiences at similar percentages to heterosexual women and are therefore at increased risk of violence (Ford & Soto-

Marquez, 2016). Bisexual women are the most vulnerable to sexual violence in college with nearly 40% reporting a sexual assault experience in college (Ford & Soto-Marquez et al., 2016; Rita et al., 2018). LGBTQ+ students, students of color, and students with disabilities experience higher rates of sexual violence than other students (Fedina et al., 2016; Ford & Soto-Marquez, 2016; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019; Mellins et al., 2017). Underclassmen experience higher rates of sexual violence than upperclassmen (Fedina et al., 2016). Socioeconomic status is also tied with increased risk of sexual violence, with low-income students (i.e., those who reported having difficulty paying for basic expenses) experiencing higher rates of sexual assault (Mellins et al., 2017). Wealthy students control more of the space of campus by owning/renting more physical where they hold the authority and having access to more resources which puts socioeconomically disadvantaged students at increased risk of sexual violence; those that control the space tend to have the power (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). College students who reported participating in more casual sexual encounters or hook-ups also reported higher rates of sexual violence than college students who engaged in exclusive and monogamous relationships (Ford, Soto-Marquez, et al., 2016; Mellins et al., 2017).

Last, if students have previously experienced sexual violence (before college or during college), their risk of being victimized again increases exponentially (Fedina et al., 2016; Gross et al., 2006; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019; Mellins et al., 2017). Taken together, these sociocultural factors related to gender, class, and racial inequalities directly contribute to the high prevalence of sexual assault on college campuses and the tolerance of a rape-supportive culture (Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). Many of the demographics mentioned above intersect to create complex identities and power differences that become even more apparent when people engage in sexual behavior. This intersectionality cannot be ignored as Black women experience

extremely high rates of sexual violence, which is tied to the structural racism and sexism on which the college system was built (Gross et al., 2006).

Perpetrator Characteristics

Sexual violence is perpetrated by people, mostly men, in a variety of different roles, frequently romantic partners, friends, and acquaintances (Cantor at al., 2020; Gross et al., 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). While stranger rape is often hyped in the media, it is much less common that a person unknown to the victim will perpetrate assault; 16.7% of women and 22.8% of men who have been assaulted report being raped by a stranger (Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). A societal culture of toxic masculinity that promotes the dominance, power, and subjection of women is one reason why men are more likely to be perpetrators of sexual violence (Greathouse et al., 2015; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Wegner et al., 2015). Sexism and misogyny are deeply entrenched in the ways people engage in sexual acts and men are taught from an early age that they must seek and desire sex with women (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Cisgender men overwhelmingly comprise perpetrators no matter the gender of the victim. In a campus climate survey conducted by the Association of American Universities, researchers found that men perpetrate 99% of all sexual assaults against women and 86% of all sexual assaults against transgender, genderqueer, and non-conforming students (Cantor et al., 2020).

Additionally, a small minority of men seem to commit the majority of perpetrators; many campus sexual assaults are the result of a repeat offender (Foubert et al., 2020). Men who have a history of perpetrating sexual violence are more likely to perpetrate another act of sexual violence than men who do not share similar histories (Loh et al., 2005).

Certain experiences and characteristics can contribute to the perpetration of sexual assault. Men who have been exposed to childhood physical violence or family violence are more

likely to perpetrate violence (Greathouse et al., 2015). It is important to note, not all men who experience physical abuse will later perpetrate violence, but these early childhood experiences can prime men to experience more delinquency, sexual promiscuity, and deficits in interpersonal skills, which can all lead to higher rates of sexual violence perpetration (Greathouse et al., 2015).

Structural Factors that Facilitate Sexual Violence on College Campuses

In addition to individual (i.e., micro) factors that contribute to sexual assault on college campuses, there are structural (i.e., macro) factors that contribute to widespread sexual violence. The structural factors that have been associated with sexual assaults include a school's party and Greek life culture, athletics, substance use, size, and affluence as well as temporal risks (Crannery, 2016; Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017).

Greek Life

Greek life and its associated party culture increase the incidence of sexual assault (Armstrong et al., 2006; Franklin et al., 2012; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017; Mellins et al., 2017). On residential campuses, Greek houses are often the only places to party and drink alcohol. The rules of the Greek system often dictate that only fraternities can serve alcohol, which leads to many women partying in exclusively male-controlled spaces (Armstrong et al., 2006; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). In these spaces, men control the themes (e.g., how to dress), music, transportation (e.g., designated drivers to a fraternity), admission, and access to alcohol, which can lead to sexual assault because women are placed in subordinate positions while men hold the power (Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017).

The social context of different types of alcohol is also controlled by fraternities at these parties. While Greek life governing bodies ban the consumption of hard liquor at parties, many people drink hard alcohol upstairs, leading young women and other vulnerable populations away

from other bystanders and into the private bedrooms of upper-class fraternity members (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Franklin et al. (2012) found that fraternity membership indirectly predicted sexual assault through alcohol consumption and illegal drug use. They argued that the group secrecy, peer pressure, and gender role ideology in fraternities leads to abusive attitudes and risky behaviors that result in a lack of self-control and an increased risk of sexual assault (Franklin et al., 2012). Other researchers have supported these ideas, adding that male dominance, fraternity brotherhood, and the male peer support model create sexual violence (Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017).

Athletics

Institutions with greater numbers of athletes are more likely to report rape on their campuses (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). Student-athletes are more likely than non-athletes to be involved in sexual coercion (Young et al., 2017). Like power dynamics within the Greek system, hypermasculinity, male dominance, and sexism are cited as associated factors as athletics tend to enforce traditional gender roles, which can lead to sexual violence (Young et al., 2017). In sports teams, men find comradery and loyalty from their teammates, which can produce homogenous groups of individuals who endorse rape-supportive attitudes and make them prone to sexual violence (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). Young et al. (2017) found that athletes, in comparison to non-athletes, strongly endorsed rape myths; this was true for both intercollegiate and recreational athletes. It seems that rape myth acceptance and traditional gender role attitudes are what drives athletes to have a higher prevalence of sexual coercion because once the researchers controlled for these factors, they were able to eliminate all differences between athletes and non-athletes in the prevalence of sexual coercion (Young et al., 2017). Sawyer et al. (2002) found that male athletes are more likely to endorse rape myth

attitudes than female athletes which suggests that athletics are not a homogenous group and there are gendered stereotypes at play.

Substance Use

Substance use, particularly alcohol, can complicate the sexual landscape on college campuses as well. Young people frequently get drunk in order to have sex because it acts as a social lubricant and reduces sexual inhibitions (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Alcohol in itself is not necessarily the problem, but when alcohol mixes with other individual and structural factors that complicate sex (e.g., socioeconomic power differentials, gender roles), it can be much harder to navigate a healthy sexual encounter.

Schools with higher number of liquor violations tend to also report higher rates of sexual assault (Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). It is important to note that alcohol not only puts people at risk for being assaulted but facilitates men committing assault (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Binge drinking has been associated with an increased risk of sexual violence and alcohol is a frequent method of incapacitation used by people who perpetrate assaults (Mellins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2016).

Other drug use has been associated with increased risk of sexual violence, particularly date rape (Butler & Welch, 2009), however, marijuana has been less studied in the literature. As marijuana is becoming legalized by states across the country, it is important to consider the ways it interacts with sexual violence. Floyd (2017) found that marijuana is the most common drug reported (other than alcohol) when drugs are present in sexual assault and that marijuana is often used together with alcohol in sexual assault. Marijuana impacts cognition and which is critical in sexual situations. Floyd (2017) recommended more extensive research on the effects of

marijuana alone on sexual assault, especially as the drug becomes more highly used on college campuses.

University Size and Status

Public institutions in comparison to private institutions are more likely to report instances of rape on their campuses (Cranney, 2016; Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). This could be because public institutions tend to be larger in size and therefore there is increased exposure to assault risk, higher numbers of potential perpetrators, and greater opportunity to perpetrate violence (Cranney, 2016). Cranney (2016) also found that when accounting for population, larger institutions had a high percentage of sexual violence. It has yet to be determined why such an effect exists and cannot only be accounted for by more bars on campus or higher exposure to strangers (Cranney, 2016). Higher tuition was also correlated with increased reports of sexual assault when compared to lower rates of tuition (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). This effect is not accounted for in the literature either and warrants further examination. One hypothesis could be that higher tuition creates more socioeconomic disparities between students and heightens the power difference between wealthier and poorer students, which could contribute to an increase in sexual violence (Hirsch & Khan, 2020, Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017).

Temporal Factors

Researchers have coined the term, the “Red Zone,” to describe the temporal relationship between sexual assault and college; the “Red Zone” refers to a time period near the beginning of a student’s time at college in which the student is at a heightened risk of sexual assault (Cranney et al., 2015). Studies have consistently found that sexual assault risk increases for women during their first and second year of college especially in the fall and winter (Cranney et al., 2015; Kimble et al., 2008). In a 2015 survey, the Association of American Universities found that more

than 50% of college sexual assaults occurred in either August, September, October, or November (Cantor et al., 2020). This increased risk of sexual assault could be due to perpetrators seeking out less experienced and more vulnerable victims or that as people move through college, many develop informal rules and methods for avoiding sexual assault such as not attending certain fraternity parties with known negative reputations (Cranney et al., 2015). However, researchers have pointed out that the "Red Zone" differs from school to school and the temporal risk for sexual assault is not the same across all schools (Kimble et al., 2008).

Sexual Violence Prevention on College Campuses

With so many intersecting individual and structural factors, preventing the public health crisis of sexual assault can be complicated. With such a high prevalence of sexual assault during college (i.e., 1 in 5 women), one might assume that prevention research would be prioritized in the field of public health. Instead, there is a lack of funding for sexual assault prevention methods (Halstead et al., 2017; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019; Millins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Public health funding for preventative interventions is much more pervasive for topics like breast cancer, which, comparatively, will affect fewer women than sexual violence. We list several sexual assault prevention method frameworks below, and while some research shows they have made some small-scale differences, the overall sexual assault rate among (at least) one in five women has not changed since 1950 (Muehlenhard et al., 2017). It is important to note that continued research and funding in this field is needed for large-scale reduction in rates of sexual violence on college campuses and beyond.

Prevention Frameworks

There are a few sexual assault prevention frameworks that have been popular on college campuses. When taught in a sex-positive way, refusal skills, consent education, bystander

training, and mentorship programs are all shown to be effective in reducing sexual violence, though there are mixed reviews of each (Hirsch & Mellins, 2019). In a sex-positive framework, sex is viewed within the positives of sexual health, pleasure, and satisfying intimate relationships (Hirsch & Mellins, 2019). Sex-positive programs validate every individual's sexual autonomy and citizenship and understand that young adults will frequently engage in sexual activities. Instead of focusing on abstinence, sex-positive trainings focus on the positives of healthy sexual encounters and encourage young people to pursue pleasure and intimacy with their partners in a safe and healthy way.

Refusal training includes learning how to say no to sex (Hirsch & Mellins, 2019). Refusal training, however, has been criticized for its victim-blaming framework and putting the onus on the survivor to refuse instead of teaching the perpetrator not to perpetrate (Kitzinger & Frith, 1999). Consent education is another common sexual assault prevention technique. Consent is most often defined as an internal state of willingness and is a continuous process as opposed to a discrete process and involves explicit and implicit, verbal and behavioral cues (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Additionally, affirmative consent involves each party saying "yes," often verbally, to the sexual activity, instead of having a default assumption that consent is only present if a person does not say "no" (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). Across many studies, students reported typically communicating consent using nonverbal behaviors or not resisting their partners' advances and reported verbally asking for and receiving content with the least frequency (Muehlenhard et al., 2016). This conflicts with the foundation of most consent education programs, which teach verbal consent exclusively as many students do not frequently use verbal consent in their sexual activities. Teaching verbal consent exclusively, especially without affirmative consent, has been critiqued for the same reasons as refusal training, as it does not always fit the context of college

students' sexual behaviors and blames survivors for not communicating clear consent boundaries (Jozkowski, 2016).

Another approach to sexual assault prevention is bystander training, which teaches people how to identify and intervene in potentially harmful sexual situations (Hirsch & Mellins, 2019). Bystander trainings have also received mixed reviews because they fail to teach people how to intervene against aggression and violence and do not work as well as theorized (Levine et al., 2020). Another, more recent approach to reducing violence is the Mentors in Violence Prevention (MVP) program which has been found to be effective and appealing to male athletes, as it frames men as allies in preventing violence rather than as perpetrators (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017). MVP employs a social justice, gender-focused approach to bystander intervention (Katz et al., 2018). As with other strategies, however, while the MVP has been shown to decrease sexist attitudes, there is little to no evidence showing if the program decreases rates of sexual violence on college campuses (Cissner, 2009). Consent education, bystander intervention training, and MVP programs consistently show that people change their minds and attitudes after attending a workshop but these changes in attitudes do little to change behaviors and decrease rates of violence on campus.

In addition to the various programming efforts with mixed reviews of effectiveness, a foundational piece of prevention is not necessarily more trainings or services; it is about providing comprehensive sex education early and encouraging viewing each person as a sexual citizen, with rights and their own autonomy. Teaching sex-positive education before college is one of the most preventative measures in reducing sexual violence. It is about changing the overall culture to see people as humans instead of objects to use for power or pleasure (Hirsch &

Khan, 2020). However, this approach requires a cognitive shift. It is gradual and is not easily "completed" in limited educational sessions.

Sexual Violence and Prevention at Western Washington University

In summary, many factors facilitate sexual assault on college campuses, the presence of Greek life, including a higher percentage of athletes, being a public university with high tuition, and high substance use. Campuses may also employ different types of sexual assault prevention programs such as refusal training, bystander intervention, mentorship programs, and consent education.

The current study focuses on the sexual behaviors and experiences of Western Washington University (WWU) students. WWU is a mid-sized public university (~16,000 students) located in Bellingham, Washington (Western Washington University Admissions, n.d.). It is a predominantly white institution, with about 27% students of color, and 58% of the students are women. It has an in-state tuition of around $7,000, making it one of the more affordable public institutions in Washington state; the average in-state tuition for research and comprehensive four-year universities is $8,380. WWU does not have a Greek system, or Division I athletics, with only around 2% of students being involved in varsity athletics (WWU Vikings, n.d.). There are residential living options (e.g., dorms) and approximately 25% of WWU students live in the dorms and tend to be underclassmen (Western Washington University Admissions, n.d.). This is important to note as the Association of American Universities Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct reported that the majority of sexual penetration happens either in university residence halls/dorms or in other residential housing (Cantor et al., 2020).

The Clery Act reports some liquor violations and additional drug use at WWU. During the past three years, 1.25% of students were referred to the university for liquor violations. The number of liquor violations at WWU falls between Washington State University (which reported that 3.7% of its students were arrested or referred for liquor violations) and the University of Washington (which reported that 0.5% of its students were referred for liquor violations; University of Washington, 2020; Washington State University, 2020). However, these data are only a snapshot of the number of students who were reprimanded for alcohol and are not necessarily indicative of the rate of alcohol use among students. Cannabis, which is recreationally legal in Washington state, is commonly used among the student population, although there are limited data collected assessing rates of use. WWU Prevention and Wellness Services conduct a biannual survey, the National College Health Assessment, that measures students' overall health behaviors including cannabis and alcohol use. While this survey has a low response rate (14.3%), of the WWU students who took the survey, 52.6% reported using cannabis in the past 3 months and 76% reported drinking alcohol in the past 3 months (American College Health Association, 2020).

Considering the structural and individual factors that facilitate sexual assault on college campuses (Crannery, 2016; Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017), the unique social context of WWU and lack of certain factors could contribute to a lower rate of sexual violence than universities with more of these structural factors. However, other factors might dominate the social context and in place of something like Greek life.

State data collected from the Washington State Council of Presidents Campus Climate Assessment indicates students at state schools in Washington experience sexual violence on campus. A 2016 legislative report on campus sexual violence found a 5% rate of rape, other

sexual assault, or attempted sexual assault across Washington State colleges (Washington State Council of Presidents, 2016). However, the survey generated only a 2% response rate, and actual incidences of sexual violence are expected to be higher. At WWU, 20.16% of respondents reported an act of non-consensual, non-penetrative sexual touching when they were incapacitated (Washington State Council of Presidents, 2016). The majority of sexual violence at WWU happened off-campus, with a perpetrator who was a Western student known to the person. The most recent data from the Clery Act show that there were 54 reports of sexual violence from 2017-2019 (Western Washington University, 2020). The data are not necessarily representative of the entirety of student sexual assault experiences because they are collected by the Division of Enrollment and Student Services, and students tend to underreport sexual violence experiences to university administration (Volter, 2017). Research shows barriers in reporting an assault to a university's Title IX coordinator or administration, including personal rape myth acceptance, fear of retaliation, mental health issues, and skepticism of the institution (Volter, 2017). Many students do not tend to seek sexual assault counseling and prevention services provided by universities because of feelings of shame, guilt, and embarrassment, not wanting friends and family to find out, and thinking that their experience was not serious enough to report (Stoner & Cramer, 2019).

Additionally, the Clery Act only reports sexual violence that takes place on campus, not off-campus which makes it less representative of the actual rates of sexual violence happening to students. In Whatcom County, where WWU is located, there were a total of 168 reports of sexual offenses to law enforcement in 2018 (Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence, 2019). In 2018, in Washington State, around 3,000 rapes were reported to law enforcement (Commission on Sexual and Domestic Violence, 2019). The commission notes that incidents of rape compared

with reports of rape vary widely and reported rates are much lower than the actual incidence of sexual violence.

WWU has several initiatives to prevent sexual violence including the Peer Education Program and mandatory sexual violence online trainings. The Peer Health Educators are part of the Consultation and Sexual Assault Services (CASAS) group in the Office of Prevention and Wellness Services on campus. This group comprises current students, supports people who have been assaulted, and conducts outreach about sexual violence. Peer Health Educators conduct mandatory bystander interventions trainings for all division II athletic teams. CASAS serves people who have experienced sexual violence along with the WWU Health Center, the WWU Counseling Center, and the WWU Title IX office.

Previous research has shown that there are many barriers to utilizing these services, and more resources are needed to train friends on how to appropriately respond to a disclosure in informal settings as friends are the most likely people to hear about assaults (Stoner & Cramer, 2019). WWU also mandates that students complete three years of an online sexual assault training called *Haven—Understanding Sexual Assault*™ by EVERFI, Inc. Online training modules like this can be effective at increasing students' ability and intention to intervene as a bystander, as well as increasing support and empathy for people who have been assaulted (Zapp et al., 2008). The research also shows that programs like *Haven—Understanding Sexual Assault*™ help to correct perceptions of social norms regarding sexual assault (Zapp et al., 2008). These online training systems are important as they can reach a wide range of students, however, they are not in person. Conducting trainings in person has been shown to increase the efficacy of preventing sexual violence (Vladutiu et al., 2011). It is important to remember however that many prevention intervention trainings have mixed reviews, so trainings might

meet objectives for knowledge, but the research is unclear if that knowledge will translate into behavior.

Another way WWU can decrease sexual violence is by conducting studies that assess the prevalence of sexual violence and the risk factors associated with sexual violence and tailoring the existing resources to address these factors. Data collection contributes to prevention because without knowledge of what is happening, universities are unable to effectively intervene. Although the state legislature conducted a Campus Climate Survey of all Washington State Universities in 2016, individual campus climate surveys as sexual violence can vary from campus to campus (Cranney, 2016; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017). To our knowledge, no other surveys besides ones done through university administration have looked specifically at the prevalence of sexual violence and contextual factors at WWU.

Current Study

Taking all of these unique structural factors together, the current study examined the sexual behaviors and experiences of sexual assault among WWU students in order to better understand their specific needs and tailor existing resources and counseling. Our research team, comprised of faculty, staff, and students at WWU, asked three questions for the purposes of this paper:

RQ1: What is the prevalence of sexual violence (i.e., unwanted touching of a sexual nature and unwanted penetrative contact) among WWU students?

RQ1.1: What significant demographic contributors (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, relationship status) are associated with rates of sexual violence among WWU students?

RQ2: What is the prevalence of WWU students engaging in individual sexual behaviors when they didn't want to?

RQ2.1: What significant demographic contributors (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, first-generation status, relationship status) are associated with rates of engaging in unwanted sexual behaviors among WWU students?

RQ3: What is the nature (e.g., location of the assault, perpetrator characteristics, type of assault, use of substances) of WWU students' most recent incident of sexual violence since coming to college?

Method

Procedures and Participants

We recruited a convenience sample of students from WWU to participate in a cross-sectional online survey. We advertised our study on social media (i.e., Instagram) and through email and word-of-mouth. University faculty members, athletic coaches, resource offices and student organizations (e.g., Be Well WWU, Honors Program) disseminated our survey to students. We conducted two waves of survey recruitment. In our first wave, some professors offered extra credit as an incentive for participation, and it was offered for research credits in the psychology research subject pool. During our second wave of recruitment, with an influx of grant money, we disseminated $10 Amazon e-gift cards to the first 250 participants. Not all participants who took the survey received extra credit or an e-gift card, many participants opted to take the survey without receiving any incentive.

To be eligible for our survey, participants had to be over the age of 18, a current WWU student, and consent to participate in response to the informed consent form before taking the

survey. The survey took approximately 25-30 minutes to complete and consisted of questions that asked about sexual behaviors and experiences. At the end of the survey, if they indicated they wanted to receive research credit, extra credit, or a gift card, participants answered "yes" on a final question and were immediately redirected to a separate survey, unlinked to their survey responses to maintain anonymity, where they provided information to receive their incentive. If they chose "no," the survey ended. Our study procedures were approved before data collection by the WWU Institutional Review Board.

Measures

The survey was developed by faculty in Public Health and staff from WWU Prevention and Wellness Services. During survey development, the instrument was piloted with 3 undergraduate research assistants, 8 undergraduate peer educators, a professor in Public Health, and the director of the LGBTQ+ Resource Center. The survey assessed a wide range of sexual attitudes, but this paper analyzed a subset of those questions related to sexual assault experiences and prevalence.

Demographic Questions

We asked students to self-report their age, gender identity, pronouns, sexual orientation, relationship status, year in school, major, and racial/ethnic identity. We asked about students' living arrangements, if they were a member of an athletic team, and if they were first-generation college students.

Sexual Experiences

Nine questions assessed different types of sexual behaviors in which participants engaged (e.g., kissing, genital stimulation, oral sex, vaginal intercourse, anal intercourse) and the wanted nature of those behaviors. The question block began with: "*Sometimes [people] engage in*

behaviors when they don't necessarily want to. Engaging in unwanted behaviors could range across many circumstances. A person could have done something because their partner wanted to but they were tired and didn't really want to at the moment, yet they did it anyway. Or it could be that they were unsure about doing it or did not want to do it and someone coerced or convinced them to do it." For each behavior, participants could have chosen all that apply from five options: "I have experienced this when I wanted to," "I have experienced this when I didn't want to," "I have never experienced this and never wanted to," "I have never experienced this but I want to," and "N/A." This study will focus on behaviors participants engaged in when they did not want to.

General Sexual Violence

The authors used the 2018 #ISpeak Rutgers Campus Climate Survey as a foundation for the sexual violence section but augmented questions for language and relevance to WWU's campus. First, we defined terms for participants in its own description block. Participants read:

"*Unwanted sexual contact may involve unwanted touching of a sexual nature or unwanted penetrative contact. Unwanted touching of a sexual nature includes the following: 1) Touching of an unwilling or non-consenting person's intimate parts (such as genitalia, groin, breast, buttocks, or mouth under or over a person's clothes). 2) Touching an unwilling person or non-consenting person with one's own intimate parts. 3) Forcing an unwilling or non-consenting person to touch another's intimate parts. 4) Kissing an unwilling or non-consenting person.*

Unwanted penetrative contact includes the following: 1) Penetrating an unwilling or non-consenting person orally, anally, or vaginally with any object or body part. 2) An unwilling or non-consenting person being made to penetrate someone else orally, anally, or vaginally with any object or body part. 3) Oral contact includes either of the following: The mouth or tongue

making contact with genitals of an unwilling or non-consenting person or an unwilling or non-consenting person's mouth or tongue making contact with someone else's genitals."

Following the definitions page, first, we asked whether participants had experienced "unwanted sexual contact" in five different circumstances. Then we asked about the same five different circumstances for "unwanted penetrative contact." The five circumstances were:

1) By someone using physical force (power, violence, or pressure directed against a person consisting in a physical act).

2) By someone coercing (persuading) you or threatening to use physical force.

3) When you were unable to provide consent or stop what was happening because you were passed out, drugged, drunk, high, incapacitated, vulnerable, or asleep. This question asks about incidents you are certain happened.

4) When you were unable to provide consent or stop what was happening because you were passed out, drugged, drunk, high, incapacitated, vulnerable, or asleep. This question asks about incidents you think (but are not certain) happened.

5) By someone ignoring your refusal(s) (whether verbal or non-verbal).

For each circumstance, participants could have selected all from: "never," "yes, before college" and "yes, after college." Finally, we asked all participants, "How many separate incidents of unwanted sexual contact have you experienced since you came to college?" They could have answered "0 incidences," "1 incident," "2 incidents," "3 incidents," "4 incidents," or "5 or more incidents."

Most Recent Incidence of Sexual Violence

If participants answered they had experienced zero incidents of unwanted sexual contact since they came to college, they were directed to the next section, skipping this section. If they

answered one or more incidents, we then asked them 10 questions about their most recent incident of unwanted sexual contact since coming to college. The questions included the following:

1. "Did the most recent incident occur in the last 12 months?"
2. "During the most recent incident what happened to you?" Participants chose if someone had unwanted sexual contact with them under the five circumstances previously discussed (e.g., physical force, coercion, incapacitation, ignoring refusal).
3. "During the most recent incident, do you suspect you had been given a drug without your knowledge or consent?"
4. "Who did the unwanted sexual contact involve?" Options included: current romantic partner, casual acquaintance or hookup, ex-romantic partner, stranger, friend, family member, coworker, employer/supervisor, university professor/instructor from Western or somewhere else, and field/intern instructor or supervisor from Western or somewhere else (with the option to provide text).
5. "Was the person who did this to you a student at Western when this happened?"
6. "What was the gender of the person who did this to you?" Options included: agender, genderqueer/fluid, man, nonbinary, trans man, trans woman, two-spirit, woman, a gender not listed or unknown.
7. "Was the other person using?" Options included: alcohol, marijuana, other drugs, alcohol and marijuana, alcohol and other drugs, marijuana and other drugs, none, or unknown.

8. "Just prior to the most recent incident, had you been drinking alcohol? Keep in mind that you are in no way responsible for the assault that occurred, even if you had been drinking."
9. "Just prior to the most recent incident, had you been voluntarily been taking or using any drugs other than alcohol? Keep in mind that you are in no way responsible for the assault that occurred, even if you were using drugs."
10. "Where did the incident occur?" Options included: your own on-campus apartment/house, your own off-campus apartment/house, your own home where you reside with a parent/guardian, a residence hall, an on-campus apartment/house, an off-campus apartment/house, a field placement or school related internship location, or other (with the option to provide text).

It is important to note throughout these sections, we were careful to include content warnings and reiteration that these experiences were not their fault. At the beginning of this section, we stated: "*We realize recalling this information may be distressing and we want to thank you for sharing. You are not alone and it is not your fault. Support options are available and will be listed at the end of the survey*." When discussing substance use, we told participants, "*Keep in mind that you are in no way responsible for the assault that occurred, even if you were using drugs [alcohol]*."

Analyses

All data were collected through Qualtrics and downloaded into SPSS 27 for analysis. In total, we collected 1064 responses from participants. During data cleaning, we removed participants who did not attend WWU or who were younger than 18, as those were our eligibility requirements and those who left the survey blank ($N = 105$). For the purpose of this study, we

also removed participants who were 25 or older to focus specifically on young adult college students ($N = 34$). The final analytic sample included 924 participants.

The majority of the participants identified as women (68.3%), Caucasian (76.7%), and identified as a variety of sexual orientations with heterosexual being the largest group (52.1%). The mean age was 19.91 ($SD = 1.32$). See Table 1 for all demographic characteristics.

First, we ran descriptive statistics on all survey questions listed. To analyze overall rates of sexual violence, we combined both types of unwanted sexual contact for the sexual assault questions (including touching of a sexual nature and penetrative contact) before and during college. To analyze overall rates of unwanted sexual experiences for the behavior questions, we combined giving and receiving anal sex, giving and receiving genital stimulation, giving and receiving oral sex, kissing, and vaginal intercourse. Next, we ran chi-square tests on sexual violence rates and unwanted sexual experience rates to compare rates across gender identity, sexual orientation, first-generation status, relationship status, racial identity, and athletic status.

In creating demographic categories that ensured cell sizes of 5 or more for chi-square tests, we intentionally combined smaller categories into larger categories. For sexual orientation, we combined “Gay/Lesbian,” “Asexual,” “Queer,” “Pansexual” and “Another orientation not listed here” into “LGQ+”. For gender identity, we combined “Agender,” “Genderqueer/fluid,” “Nonbinary, “Trans man,” “Trans woman,” “Two-spirit” and “A gender not listed here” into a “Gender Expansive” category. For relationship status, we collapsed the categories into “Single” and “Relationship.” Single included “Single and not currently dating,” “Single and wanting to date but not currently seeing/talking to/hanging out with someone,” “Single, but casually seeing/talking to/hanging out with someone,” “Single, but casually seeing/talking to/hanging out with more than one person,” and “Divorced.” Relationship included “In a committed relationship

with one person," "In a (or multiple) committed relationship(s) that is open or polyamorous," "Engaged," and "Married." To analyze by racial identity, we created two categories, white and "Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)." BIPOC included "Asian," "Black/African American," "Hispanic/Latinx," "Native American," "Pacific Islander," and any combination of more than one racial identity. We reported a Cramer's *V* for our chi-square tests as a measure of effect size and followed up with Fisher's Exact tests on significant chi-square tests to determine where significant differences were.

Results

Sexual Violence

One in five (21.0%) of the participants reported experiencing sexual violence during college. Around a third of participants (35.2%) had already experienced sexual violence before college. Overall, 45.6% of all participants (n = 421) reported experiencing sexual violence before and/or during college. Of these 421 participants who reported lifetime sexual violence, 23.3% (n = 98) experienced it both before *and* during college, 53.9% (n = 227) experienced it *only* before college, and 22.8% (n = 96) experienced it *only* during college.

When looking at frequencies by gender and sexual orientation, notably, almost two-thirds (64.3%) of bisexual women reported experiencing sexual violence in their lifetime, with almost half (49.7%) coming to college with sexual violence experience and another third (32.2%) of this sample experiencing sexual violence during college. Additionally, almost half (49.1%) of heterosexual women and 44% of LGQ+ women reported experiencing sexual assault before and/or during college (see Table 2 for frequencies).

Of people who reported any lifetime sexual violence, the largest group (23.6%) experienced unwanted touching of a sexual nature before college in which the perpetrator

ignored their refusal. The second largest group (19.8%) reported experiencing unwanted touching before college during which the perpetrator used coercion (e.g., persuading and/or threatening to use force). See Table 3 for rates of sexual violence experiences under the five circumstances before and during college.

Chi-square tests indicated significant differences in overall sexual violence rates (before and/or during college) by sexual orientation [$X^2(2, N = 920) = 31.009, p < .001$], gender identity [$X^2(2, N = 916) = 69.296, p < .001$], athletic status [$X^2(1, N = 923) = 8.518, p = .004$], and relationship status [$X^2(1, N = 923) = 12.336, p < .001$]. Post-hoc pairwise Fisher's exact tests with a Bonferroni correction indicated that a higher proportion of bisexual individuals ($p < .001$) experienced sexual violence compared to heterosexual individuals. Post-hoc tests also indicated that higher proportions of women ($p < .001$) and gender expansive individuals ($p <.001$) reported experiencing sexual violence compared to men, a higher proportion of non-athletes experienced sexual violence compared to athletes ($p = .004$), and people in relationships were more likely to experience sexual violence than single people ($p = .001$). There were no significant differences in sexual violence rates by first-generation status or racial identity (See Table 4).

Unwanted Sexual Experiences

Overall, 44% of participants reported engaging in one or more different sexual behaviors when they did not want to. Of those participants, about 13% simultaneously reported they had never experienced sexual violence. When examining rates by behavior, almost a third of participants (30.2%) reported that they had kissed/made out with another person when they did not want to and 25.1% reported that their partner had touched their genitals when they did not want them to. Around one-fifth of participants (19.2%) reported that they had touched their partners' genitals when they had not wanted to and 18.7% of participants reported that they had

given oral sex when they had not wanted to. Finally, 18.4% of participants reported experiences vaginal intercourse when they had not wanted to. See Table 5 for rates of frequencies of all unwanted sexual experiences.

Chi-square tests showed that there were significant differences in unwanted sexual experience rates by gender [$X^2(2, N = 916) = 52.938, p < .001$] and sexual orientation [$X^2(2, N = 920) = 27.303, p < .001$]. Post-hoc pairwise Fisher's exact tests indicated that a higher proportion of women ($p < .001$) and gender expansive individuals ($p < .001$) experienced unwanted sexual experiences compared to men. Post-hoc tests for sexual orientation showed that bisexual ($p < .001$) and LGQ+ individuals ($p = .003$) experienced higher rates of engaging in unwanted sexual behaviors than heterosexual individuals. There were also significant differences in unwanted sexual experience rates by relationship status [$X^2(1, N = 923) = 19.058, p < .001$]. A higher proportion of people in relationships reported unwanted sexual experiences than single people ($p = .001$). See Table 6 for chi-square unwanted sexual experiences results.

Most Recent Incident of Sexual Violence Since Coming to College

The majority of students (74.8%) reported zero instances of sexual violence since coming to college. For those that did report an incident of sexual violence ($n = 223$), a majority (57.8%) had experienced sexual violence more than 12 months ago. The most common nature of the incident was the perpetrator ignoring the refusal of the victim (44.2%). Nearly all participants said that no drugs were given to them without their knowledge or consent to perpetrate the assault (96.8%); however, 44.8% of perpetrators were known to be using alcohol, marijuana, and/or other drugs at the time of the assault. Most victims were not using alcohol (58.2%) or drugs (85.0%) before the incident. Perpetrators were overwhelmingly men (92.7%) and their relationship to the victim was most often a casual acquaintance or hook up (32.8%), an ex

(20.9%), or a friend (18.9%). In a majority of cases (56.3%), the perpetrator was not a Western student. Around a third (34.5%) of the incidents took place in an off-campus apartment and 19.5% occurred in a location not listed on the survey. Locations not listed included "a club," "a car," and "a bar." See Table 7 for complete characteristics of the most recent incident of sexual violence.

Discussion

Many of our findings were consistent with the national trends in sexual violence that around 1 in 5 women will experience sexual violence, and women and LGBTQ+ people experience the highest rates of violence (Fedina et al., 2017; Ford & Soto-Marquez, 2016; Halstead et al., 2017; Hirsch & Mellins, 2019; Millins et al., 2017; Muehlenhard et al., 2017). Thus, even though WWU lacks certain structural factors that facilitate sexual violence on campuses, such as Greek life, Division I athletics, and high tuition (Armstrong et al., 2006; Franklin et al., 2012; Jozkowski & Wiersma-Mosley, 2017; Mellins et al., 2017; Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017), rates of college sexual violence remain constant. Structural factors may be facilitators of sexual violence at universities but things like power, sexism, toxic masculinity, homophobia, and rape culture prevail no matter the structure of the university. These societal systems and structures seem to support and facilitate sexual violence on a universal level and prevention efforts need to address these larger societal values.

Our study reveals several important elements to the discussion of sexual violence among college students and implications for intervention. Our data show that women, particularly bisexual women, experience higher rates of sexual violence and many students come to college already having experienced sexual violence. People in our survey reported revictimization and multiple instances of sexual violence. The largest group of students who had been assaulted since

coming to college reported that the perpetrator ignored their refusal, however, some students chose not to label their unwanted sexual experiences as sexual violence.

Impact of Gender

Gender remains a salient demographic factor driving rates of sexual violence. Across all of the literature and in our study, there is a strong pattern of victims who are women and gender-expansive and perpetrators who are men. Gender norms and sexual scripts facilitate this type of gendered violence where women and those people outside of the gender binary are endowed with less power in relationships and are often taught to be submissive and selfless (Armstrong et al., 2006). Women are often burdened with greater responsibility regarding sexual management and expected to gatekeep sex (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Certainly, sexism, misogyny, and general discrimination toward women and gender-expansive individuals on a structural level contribute to the patriarchal view of sex in our society that gives little regard to the sexual autonomy, citizenship, and wants of people besides men. The fact that the vast majority of perpetrators reported in this study were men is not surprising given that the vast majority of sexual assaults are committed by men across all studies (Cantor et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Similar to societal pressure on women, men are subject to a culture of toxic masculinity that promotes the dominance, power, and subjection of women and gender-expansive individuals (Greathouse et al., 2015; Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Wegner et al., 2015). Misogyny teaches men to desire and chase sex above all else which can create harmful understandings of sexual behaviors and sexual autonomy (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). There are certain mentorship programs in colleges that work with men to reduce sexual violence and yet this pattern of gendered violence remains salient (Cissner, 2009; Katz et al., 2018). This tells us

that education likely needs to begin at much younger ages on a much more global scale to reduce negative attitudes and create a culture where every gender is given a right to sexual citizenship.

Bisexual Women

Bisexual women experienced the highest rates of sexual violence, both before and during college. Researchers have suggested that biphobia and sexism both contribute tremendously to the higher rates of sexual violence among this group (Seabrook et al., 2018). Both heterosexual and LGQ+ individuals contribute to biphobia in which bisexual individuals are often excluded from either the heterosexual or LGQ+ communities because they fail to completely fall in one group (Seabrook et al., 2018). There are also negative stereotypes about bisexual women that they are promiscuous and sexually active which might contribute to higher rates of violence (Seabrook et al., 2018). Given the high rates reported by the WWU students in this sample, this group of individuals deserves specific attention, and prevention efforts should focus on the needs of this community.

Prior Experience with Sexual Violence

Many students reported experiencing several incidents of sexual violence since coming to college and reported experiencing sexual violence both before and during college. Due to the format of the questions and cross-sectional nature of the data, we were unable to measure the extent to which people had experienced repeat victimization in our sample, but we can infer at least some participants had lived through multiple instances, which is consistent with previous research (Mellins et al., 2017). Previous work has shown that people who have experienced multiple acts of sexual violence have more concerning substance use, use less alcohol harm reduction behaviors, and engage in more unprotected sex (Walsh et al., 2020). Though these findings may be relevant contributors, it is important to note that the onus is on perpetrators to

stop assaulting, not for victims to change their behavior or blame them for coping mechanisms. However, given that repeat victimization a common occurrence on college campuses it is important for universities to think of ways to support survivors in a way that decreases repeat instances.

In addition to re-victimization, a high proportion of students reported experiencing sexual violence before college. More students reported experiencing sexual violence before college than during college. This underscores the need for prevention efforts to focus on younger populations, for colleges to implement trauma-informed policies, and for faculty and staff to understand that a high percentage of students will have experienced a type of sexual violence upon coming to campus.

Nature of Sexual Violence

The most common sexual violence incident since coming to college among our sample was a person close to the victim (a friend, an ex-partner, or casual acquaintance or hook-up) ignoring the victim's refusal and touching the victim in a sexual nature. Both perpetrators and victims reported a high proportion of substance use during the assault which is common on college campuses (Hirsch & Khan, 2020). Given that substances can facilitate sexual violence it is important to consider prevention efforts that target substance use on college campuses. It is also critical to note that even if victims are using a substance during an assault, they are never to blame for sexual violence, only the perpetrator is responsible. In accordance with previous work, stranger rape is much less common, people are much more likely to know their perpetrator than not (Cantor et al., 2020; Gross et al., 2006; Tjaden & Thoennes, 2006). Unwanted touching of a sexual nature was more commonly reported than unwanted penetrative contact, which is why surveys need to include expanded definitions of sexual violence; often non-penetrative sexual

touching is viewed as less extreme even though it can cause significant harm (Mellins et al., 2017). As many of the assaults included the perpetrator ignoring the refusal of the victim, prevention methods are needed that specifically address sexual perpetration when someone ignores a refusal, whether verbal or non-verbal. Physical force and incapacitation are commonly addressed in prevention efforts as they are easy to see as an unwanted sexual experience, where ignoring a refusal is sometimes viewed as a miscommunication instead of an assault.

Labeling of Experiences

Another notable finding was that some people did not necessarily label harmful sexual experiences as sexual violence. There were discrepancies between those who reported that they engaged in sexual behaviors when they did not want to and those who reported an experience of sexual violence. It is important to let students label their own experiences and avoid placing traumatization on students by labeling their experiences as assault. However, many of these students have experienced harmful sexual encounters, and prevention efforts should focus on supporting students who did not experience sexual violence but still had unwanted sexual experiences.

Implications for Education at WWU

There are many areas highlighted in the survey that could inform education and prevention frameworks to address sexual violence at WWU. As bisexual women are at increased risk of sexual violence, prevention groups at WWU should focus on that demographic group and work to decrease biphobia and stereotypes about bisexual women. With the high percentage of people coming to WWU who have already experienced sexual violence, staff and professors should be trained in trauma-informed educational practices and there should be resources in place for first-year students in their first quarter. Prevention trainings should focus on when

perpetrators ignore a victim's refusal like how to communicate during sexual behaviors when your partner does not want to engage in the behavior and how to pick up on verbal and nonverbal refusals. Finally, given that many WWU students have experienced harmful sexual experienced that they do not label as sexual violence, WWU needs to develop specific support systems for this subpopulation of students. Many students feel alienated by organizations like CASAS because they may not label their experiences as sexual assault. Providing opportunities for support that does not carry the label of sexual violence could allow more students to receive support and resources.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Research

This study had many strengths. First, we intentionally used inclusive language (e.g., gender-neutral questions) and our demographic questions were expansive allowing students to choose or write in the identity that best fit them. Using this inclusive language allows students of all identities to feel represented by the data and allowed the research team to capture the breadth of student experiences. We also used a comprehensive definition of sexual violence in the survey that included things that other sexual health surveys have not included. Our definition of sexual violence was broader than the legal definition of sexual assault which often only includes penetrative sexual violence (Muehlenhard et al, 2017). This more extensive definition could account for the slightly higher numbers of reported acts of sexual violence. Definitions can make replicating research tricky and inconsistent, which is why our definitions are comprehensive and up to date with the current understanding of sexual violence (Krause et al., 2019; Muehlenhard et al., 2017).

There were also some limitations of note. First, we collected data via convenience sampling which resulted in oversampling specific groups of WWU students. High proportions of

women and white students took our survey and results are not necessarily generalizable to all WWU students. Survey recruitment methods and snowball sampling likely led to this discrepancy in the demographics of the participants. Additionally, high proportions of psychology students, peer educators, honors students, and students in the Health and Human Development department took the survey and these students may have a higher awareness of sexual health if they have taken university-level classes on the subject which might have influenced their responses.

We also faced challenges associated with labeling identities and collapsing categories across identities. While we did allow students to choose from a variety of options and self-identify, we had to combine multiple identities to achieve statistical significance during analyses. Collapsing all sexual minority groups into one label, all gender expansive groups into one label, and several racial identities into one label reduces our ability to assess nuances in various identities and risks losing the specific experiences of marginalized groups.

The lack of significant effects of race or first-generation status on sexual violence is important to note as a limitation. We had small samples of BIPOC students and first-generation students which could contribute to the lack of significant findings. As noted above, because we collapsed across various types of different identities, we could have missed the nuances of how race or first-generation status interacts with sexual violence. There are mixed findings in the literature surrounding increased risk of racial minorities, some studies have not any effects of race while others have reported that Black women in particular face higher rates of sexual violence (Gross et al., 2006; Mellins et al., 2017). Additionally, those who experience obstacles to their education, like low-income students or first-generation students experience higher rates of sexual violence (Hirsch & Khan, 2020; Mellins et al., 2017). This lack of significant findings

could also be due to the strong effect of gender on sexual violence. Future research is needed to parse out the effect of these variables.

A further limitation was that we only asked about the participants' athlete status and did not specifically ask about the athlete status of perpetrators in the most recent incident of sexual assault. This information would have lent more relevant information to what is known about athletics and the perpetration of sexual assault (Wiersma-Mosley et al., 2017; Young et al., 2017).

Finally, all of our data were collected during the Covid-19 pandemic. This could have affected our results in at least two ways: it could have increased rates of sexual violence because participants could have been living with a perpetrator or in a social distancing “pod” with close friends, as most perpetrators were friends or current and previous partners. Domestic violence calls increased during the pandemic because people were living with their abusers and so these various living dynamics could have affected our data (Kofman & Garfin, 2020). Conversely, the pandemic might have decreased rates of sexual violence because fewer people were living on campus or in Bellingham and some were living with their parents or back in their hometowns. Students may have generally been going out less and they may have dated less or engaged in fewer casual hookups.

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Appendix

Table 1. Participant Demographics (*N* = 924)

Characteristic	*n* (%)
Age	
18	128 (13.9)
19	252 (27.3)
20	270 (29.2)
21	167 (18.1)
22	78 (8.4)
23-24	29 (3.1)
Year in School	
First Year	193 (20.9)
Second Year	254 (27.5)
Third Year	270 (29.3)
Fourth Year	165 (17.9)
Fifth Year or Above	40 (4.3)
Gender Identity	
Man	196 (21.4)
Woman	626 (68.3)
Gender Expansive[a]	94 (10.3)
Pronouns	
He/Him	207 (22.4)
She/Her	633 (68.5)
They/Them	44 (4.8)
Another Pronoun Combination	40 (4.3)
First Generation College Student	

Table 1. (Continued)

Yes	167 (18.1)
College of Major	
Business and Economics	58 (6.3)
Fine and Performing Arts	39 (4.2)
Humanities and Social Sciences	308 (33.3)
Science and Engineering	185 (20.0)
Fairhaven College of Interdisciplinary Studies	25 (2.7)
Graduate School	1 (0.1)
Huxley College of the Environment	56 (6.1)
Woodring College of Education	43 (4.7)
Don't Know/Undeclared	209 (22.6)
Sexual Orientation	
Heterosexual	481 (52.1)
Gay/Lesbian	60 (6.5)
Bisexual	222 (24.0)
Asexual	37 (4.0)
Another Orientation	124 (13.4)
Relationship Status[b]	
Single	529 (57.4)
Relationship	392 (42.6)
Racial and/or Ethnic Identity	
Asian	64 (7.0)
Black/African American	9 (1.0)

Table 1. (Continued)

Caucasian	696 (76.7)
Hispanic/Latinx	25 (2.8)
Native American	2 (0.2)
Pacific Islander	1 (0.1)
Multiracial[c]	111 (12.2)
Sports Team Affiliation	
Yes	56 (6.1)
Current Living Situation[d]	
On-campus	120 (22.6)
Off-campus	621 (67.2)
Permanent residence	141 (15.3)
Other	42 (4.5)

[a]Gender expansive includes "Agender," "Genderqueer/fluid," "Nonbinary, "Trans man," "Trans woman," "Two-spirit" and "A gender not listed here."
[b]Single includes "Single and not currently dating," "Single and wanting to date but not currently seeing/talking to/hanging out with someone," "Single, but casually seeing/talking to/hanging out with someone," "Single, but casually seeing/talking to/hanging out with more than one person," and "Divorced." Relationship includes "In a committed relationship with one person," "In a (or multiple) committed relationship(s) that is open or polyamorous," "Engaged," and "Married."
[c]Selected more than one.
[d]On-campus includes "Residence hall (dormitory or suites)," "On-campus apartment/house (alone or with roommate(s))," and "On-campus apartment/house with partner and/or dependents." Off-campus includes "Off-campus apartment/house (alone or with roommate(s))" and "Off-campus apartment/house with partner and/or dependent(s)."

Table 2. Overall Rates of Sexual Violence Experiences and Frequencies by Sexual Orientation and Gender Combined

	n (%)
Overall (*N* = 924)	
Before college	325 (35.2)
During college	194 (21.0)
Before and/or during college	421 (45.6)
Never	503 (54.4)
Sexual Orientation and Gender	
Bisexual Women (*n* = 171)	
Before college	85 (49.7)
During college	55 (32.2)
Before and/or during college	110 (64.3)
Never	61 (35.7)
Heterosexual Women (*n* = 326)	
Before college	118 (36.2)
During college	73 (22.4)
Before and/or during college	160 (49.1)
Never	166 (50.9)
LGQ+ Women (*n* = 126)	
Before college	47 (37.3)
During college	22 (17.5)
Before and/or during college	5 (44.4)
Never	70 (55.6)

Table 3. Rates of Sexual Violence Experiences under Five Circumstances ($N = 924$)

	Overall prevalence of circumstances *n* (%)	Unwanted touching of a sexual nature *n* (%)	Unwanted penetrative contact *n* (%)
Perpetrator used physical force	194 (21.0)		
Before college		151 (16.3)	55 (6.0)
During college		60 (6.5)	29 (3.0)
Never		694 (75.1)	801 (86.7)
Perpetrator used coercion	241 (26.1)		
Before college		183 (19.8)	102 (11.0)
During college		76 (8.2)	53 (5.7)
Never		636 (68.8)	720 (77.9)
Perpetrator used incapacitation (certain)	178 (19.3)		
Before college		119 (12.9)	61 (6.6)
During college		72 (7.79)	41 (4.4)
Never		696 (75.3)	770 (83.3)
Perpetrator used incapacitation (uncertain)	112 (12.1)		
Before college		75 (8.1)	44 (4.8)
During college		39 (4.2)	21 (2.3)
Never		757 (81.9)	795 (86.0)
Perpetrator ignored refusal	297 (32.1)		
Before college		218 (23.6)	113 (12.2)
During college		110 (11.9)	67 (7.3)
Never		581 (62.9)	694 (75.1)

Note. Participants could select all that apply.

Table 4. *Chi-Square Results for Demographic Characteristics and Overall Sexual Violence Rates*

	Have experienced sexual violence before and/or during college *n* (%)	Have not experienced sexual violence before and/or during college *n* (%)	χ^2	Cramer's *V*
Gender (*n* = 916)			69.296***	.275
Gender Expansive	53 (12.7)	41 (8.2)		
Women	326 (78.2)	300 (60.1)		
Men	38 (9.1)	158 (31.7)		
Sexual Orientation (*n* = 920)			31.009***	.184
Heterosexual	183 (43.5)	298 (59.7)		
LGQ+[a]	104 (24.7)	113 (22.6)		
Bisexual	134 (31.8)	88 (17.6)		
First Gen (*n* = 907)			2.934	.057
Yes	86 (20.8)	81 (16.4)		
No	327 (79.2)	413 (83.6)		
Racial Identity (*n* = 914)			1.252	.037
White	311 (74.8)	388 (77.9)		
BIPOC[b]	105 (25.2)	110 (22.1)		
Athlete (*n* = 923)			8.518**	.096
Yes	15 (3.6)	41 (8.2)		
No	406 (96.4)	461 (91.8)		
Relationship Status (*n* = 923)			12.336***	.116
Single	215 (51.1)	314 (62.5)		
Relationship	206 (48.9)	188 (37.5)		

Note. With Bonferroni correction, α = .05/6 = .008; *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001.
[a]LGQ+ includes "Gay," "Lesbian," "Queer," "Pansexual," "Asexual," and "Not listed here."
[b]BIPOC includes "Asian," "Black/African American," "Hispanic/Latinx," "Native American," and "Pacific Islander."

Table 5. Rates of Unwanted Sexual Experiences ($N = 924$)

Behavior engaged in "when I didn't want to"	*n* (%)
All behaviors	404 (43.7)
Kissed/made out with another person	279 (30.2)
Touched partners' genitals	177 (19.2)
Partner touched my genitals	232 (25.1)
Gave oral sex	173 (18.7)
Received oral sex	96 (10.4)
Vaginal intercourse (penis into vagina)	170 (18.4)
Received anal sex	75 (8.1)
Gave anal sex	4 (0.4)

Note. Participants could select all that apply.

Table 6. *Chi-Square Results for Demographic Characteristics and Unwanted Sexual Experiences*

	Reported unwanted sexual experiences *n* (%)	Did not report unwanted sexual experiences *n* (%)	χ^2	Cramer's *V*
Gender (*n* = 916)			52.938***	.240
Gender Expansive	47 (11.7)	47 (9.1)		
Women	313 (78.1)	313 (60.8)		
Men	41 (10.2)	155 (30.1)		
Sexual Orientation (*n* = 920)			27.303***	.172
Heterosexual	174 (43.1)	307 (59.5)		
LGQ+	105 (26.0)	112 (21.7)		
Bisexual	125 (30.9)	97 (18.8)		
First Gen (*n* = 907)			.036	.006
Yes	72 (18.1)	95 (18.6)		
No	325 (81.9)	415 (81.4)		
Racial Identity (*n* = 914)			.003	.002
White	307 (76.6)	392 (76.4)		
BIPOC	94 (23.4)	121 (23.6)		
Athlete (*n* = 923)			5.596*	.078
Yes	16 (4.0)	40 (7.7)		
No	388 (96.0)	479 (92.3)		
Relationship Status (*n* = 923)			19.058***	.144
Single	199 (49.3)	330 (63.6)		
Relationship	205 (50.7)	189 (36.4)		

Note. With Bonferroni correction, α = .05/6 = .008; *p< .05, **p< .01, ***p< .001.
Unwanted sexual experiences included engaging in receiving and giving anal sex, receiving and giving oral sex, touching partner's genitals or partner touching own genitals, vaginal intercourse (penis into vagina), and kissing when they "didn't want to."

Table 7. Characteristics of Most Recent Incident of Sexual Assault Since Coming to College

	n (%)
Number of separate incidents since coming to college (*N* = 924)	
0	662 (74.8)
1	114 (12.9)
2	65 (7.3)
3	26 (2.9)
4	5 (0.6)
5+	13 (1.5)
Occurrence of most recent incident[a] (*n* = 223)	
Less than 12 months from taking the survey	94 (42.2)
More than 12 months from taking the survey	129 (57.8)
Nature of perpetration (*n* = 217)	
Physical force	19 (8.8)
Coercion	43 (19.8)
Certain incapacitation	50 (23.0)
Uncertain incapacitation	9 (4.1)
Ignored refusal	96 (44.2)
Drug given to victim before incident without their knowledge/consent (*n* = 222)	
Yes	7 (3.2)
No	215 (96.8)
Victim relationship to perpetrator (*n* = 201)	
Current romantic partner	20 (10
Casual acquaintance or hookup	66 (32.8)
Ex-partner	42 (20.9)
Stranger	24 (11.9)

Table 7. (Continued)

Friend	28 (18.9)
Family member	5 (2.5)
Coworker/employer/supervisor	4 (2.5)
University professor/instructor from Western	1 (0.5)
Perpetrator was Western student (*n* = 206)	
Yes	90 (43.7)
No	116 (56.3)
Gender of perpetrator (*n* = 220)	
Man (cis and trans)	204 (92.7)
Woman (cis and trans)	15 (6.9)
I don't know	1 (0.5)
Perpetrator substance use before incident (*n* = 221)	
Alcohol	49 (22.2)
Marijuana	11 (5.0)
Other drugs	2 (0.9)
Alcohol and marijuana	37 (16.7)
None	77 (34.8)
I don't know	45 (20.4)
Victim alcohol use before incident (*n* = 220)	
Yes	92 (41.8)
No	128 (58.2)
Victim drug use before incident (*n* = 220)	
Yes	33 (15.0)
No	187 (85.0)
Location of the incident (*n* = 220)	
Own on-campus apartment	13 (5.9)

Table 7. (Continued)

Own off-campus apartment	33 (15.0)
Own house with parent/guardian	15 (6.8)
Residence hall	31 (14.1)
On-campus apartment	7 (3.2)
Off-campus apartment	76 (34.5)
School-related location	2 (0.5)
Other	43 (19.5)

Note. Frequencies of most recent incident details listed were from participants who selected one or more incidents of sexual assault since coming to college (n = 223).